

Washington and Lee University,  
Washington Hall (Center Building)  
North side of Jefferson Street, east  
of Washington Street  
Lexington (independent city)  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-568-A

HABS  
VA,  
82-LEX,  
2A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY,  
WASHINGTON HALL (CENTER BUILDING)

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Location: On the campus of Washington and Lee University,  
Lexington, Virginia. North side of Jefferson Street, east of  
Washington Street

Owner: Washington and Lee University.

Present use: Administrative offices of the university.

Brief statement of significance: The central building of the  
university complex, this building was erected in 1822-1824  
and probably designed by John Jordan, prominent local  
builder who introduced the Classical Revival style to  
this area. Much of the original design has been altered.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

A. Physical History.

1. Original and subsequent owners: Washington College, since  
1871 named Washington and Lee University.
2. Date of erection: 1822-1824.
3. Architect and builder: John Jordan. Jordan had worked -  
extent of work not established - in 1805 on construction at  
Monticello, home of Thomas Jefferson, and in 1819 on  
construction at the University of Virginia. His own home at  
Jordan's Point (Stono), 1818, is one of the first  
temple-form with portico buildings west of the Blue Ridge.  
He was prominent in the iron industry and also built roads,  
bridges, a section of the James River Canal, and many  
handsome houses in the area.

"While it is conceded that it is speculation as to whether  
or not Jordan influenced the design of the Centre Building  
before he began work on it, it is perhaps worthwhile  
remembering that it has always been the tradition at  
Washington and Lee that John Jordan was the 'architect' of  
the Centre Building. In any case, based on examples of  
Jordan's previous work, it is almost certain that many  
architectural features of the Centre Building were of Jordan's  
own design.... Although he had no formal architectural  
training, it is interesting to note that after 1805, Jordan  
himself was responsible for the designs of nearly every  
house he built." [Loth, C.C., The Ante Bellum Architecture  
of Washington and Lee University, pp. 17-19.]

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

4. The site and first plan: In 1803 the Board of Trustees of Washington Academy purchased 30 acres of land next to Lexington after its stone building west of Lexington (formerly named Liberty Hall Academy) had burned on December 24, 1802. The committee on building presented the proposal of the "able architect", Mr. Hastings, for "two Buildings to be erected on the top of the Hill fronting the town of Lexington and at so great a distance from each other as to afford at a future day a Center building." The plan called for a 5-part building, and specified that the building was to have a plain pediment front with a small cupola. Hastings' plan for the Center building was never used, but the two flanking buildings were built in 1804. There is no contemporary representation of them. The only known drawing was made by a student, D.C. Humphreys, at Washington and Lee (1875-1878) about forty years after the buildings were demolished. [Drawing in W.H. Ruffner, Washington and Lee University Historical Papers, No. 4, p. 8-9. Specifications in Loth, The Ante Bellum Architecture of Washington and Lee University, pp. 9-10.]

5. Notes on original plan and construction: There are no known original plans.

1822 (July 1) Board of Trustees appointed two members, James McDowell and Andrew Alexander, to prepare a suitable plan for proposed center building.  
(July 31) Plans were approved, and in August a bid for \$9000.00 was received from John Jordan. Final plans approved September 24, 1822. Contract on October 16, 1822. Work began soon afterward. Plans were altered after construction began.  
The style of this building "was a radical departure from the plan first offered to the Board in 1803." Now planned was a three-story temple-form building with large Tuscan portico.  
There is evidence that Jordan had worked with the building committee prior to the contract and it is conceivable that he proposed changes and alterations to their plan which were accepted.  
At first it was planned that the facade would have a two-story free-standing portico which would rest on an enclosed portion of the ground floor.

[Loth, op. cit., pp. 14-20.]

1823 (September 24) The original plan was altered so that the lower story of the portico would be open instead of enclosed. The columns would be round from the ground floor, and the entrance would be a "Dorick Door" corresponding to the one immediately above. With the opening up of the front part of the lower story, the upper floor was to lead onto a balcony stretching the entire width of the facade.

Overall dimensions of the building were 50' x 100'. Height of wall from ground level to base of cornice was approximately 35'. Even though the entrance facade had a hexastyle portico, the walls of this facade as well as of the rear facade had only three bays. The two end columns of the portico were echoed on the front wall by pilasters with very simple unmoulded brick capitals and bases. Each of the side elevations contained six bays. Also on each side elevation were five chimneys (exterior) piercing the cornice. Although the spacing of these chimneys was irregular in relation to the bays, a certain rhythm was achieved, giving the side the effect of having pilasters.

"The capitals of the Centre Building's slender Tuscan columns were given the same curious treatment as those on Stono, which was the placement of the necking at a much greater distance down the shaft than is found on the academically correct Tuscan column. This is a distinctive feature found in nearly all Jordan buildings where the Tuscan order was employed."

"The original entablature must have been extremely narrow. Moreover, it is most probable that the building was crowned by a moulded brick cornice with a very shallow frieze, since this was a device frequently employed by Jordan."

The original roofline was noted by one critic in 1834 unflatteringly as resembling "more a Dutchman's barn than anything else." This would indicate that the original roof was of a much steeper pitch. A steep-gabled roof on Center Building would again follow its analogy to Stono.

On the doors of the exterior first and second floor: "Based on examples of Jordan's existing work, chiefly Stono, it would be reasonable to assume that these entrances each contained single doors framed by side-lights. Such side-lights would probably have been separated from the door itself by some type of Doric pilaster or half-round column to warrant the use of that term. Filling in the top part of the arch would most likely have been a fan-light." It appears to Loth after examining the brickwork around the arched opening on the ground floor that the opening never has had any type of architectural enframement.

[Loth, op. cit., pp. 21-23.]

Conjectural drawings made by David C. Humphreys (1875-1878) of front elevation and floor plans of the Center Building are found in Washington and Lee University Historical Papers, No. 4.

The original floor plans are assumed to be correctly shown on David Humphrey's drawings as the floor plans were still intact at the time Humphreys was at the school (1875-1878). According to these plans the ground floor consisted of a narrow hall running the entire length of the building. This hall was bordered on either side by six classrooms. Beyond the second pair of rooms from the front, the building was traversed by a cross hall containing two flights of stairs. The second floor was basically a repeat of the ground floor except that the entire area between the stair hall and the front wall was given over to a large, two-story "exhibition" or assembly room which was also used as the chapel.

The third floor contained a small room over the east stairwell, and two long rooms separated by a long, narrow hall. The two long rooms were first used by literary societies. Also on this floor was the entrance to the gallery for the assembly room leading from the stair hall.

There are no surviving original features on the interior of the building, the whole structure having been rebuilt within the walls in 1936. According to an interview Loth had with Dr. Robert W. Dickey, who worked with architects in charge of renovation, the original interior decoration of the building was extremely simple, having few, if any, distinctive architectural features.

[Loth, op. cit., p. 24.]

Brick for the building was made on the grounds, accounting for the flattening and terracing of certain portions of the ridge. A brick mold said to have been used in the construction of the Center Building is in the Lee Chapel Museum.

1824 - In the spring the cornerstone was laid. In the fall the building was ready for occupancy.

6. Notes on known alterations:

1831 - The Lyceum was built to the west.

1835 - The balcony under the portico was removed. The upper floor exterior door on the balcony was sometime after this replaced by a window. Graham and Union Halls (the flanking buildings erected in 1804) were demolished.

1836-1837 - Construction began on two one-story dormitories to flank east and west of the main buildings. These were demolished in the 1880's.

1842 - There was much remodeling. The roof was replaced with the present roof, pedimented with a more

6. Notes on known alterations:

1842 - (continued)

classically proportioned pitch. [Loth, op. cit., p. 56.] Side walls were raised 5' to allow for the present entablature. [Loth, op. cit., p. 23.] The cupola was placed on a square base on the ridge of the roof in line with the first chimneys. The cupola (after the design of the octagonal tower of Andronicus, "The Tower of Winds", at Athens) is 32' high to top of spire. Just under its cornice was placed a wide Greek fret moulding. [Loth, op. cit., p. 56.] A building was erected to balance the Lyceum and connecting pilastered wings were added to join the Center Building with these two buildings. The contractors at this time were brickmason, James Alexander, who had previously worked for Jordan, and William Gibson. Jordan was still building in Lexington at this time. No documentation has been found to show that he was consulted in this remodeling.

1844 - The wooden statue of Washington, a good example of American folk art, was carved from one white pine log by local cabinet maker, Matthew Kahle, with the assistance of Colonel Williamson of the Virginia Military Institute.

A photograph of the college, taken between 1844-1867, shows the buildings at this time. It may be found in files of the Rockbridge Historical Society and in the Lee Chapel Museum.

There was a proposal for erection (in the place of the one-story dormitories) of two wings to the main college group similar in style and proportion to the wings added to the Central Building in 1842. The group would have resembled the print found in Howe's Historical Collections of Virginia (p. 448) but this proposal was never carried out.

1936 - The whole structure of the Center Building was rebuilt within the walls because of general decay and want of fireproofing. The interior plans were considerably altered. Chimney flues were filled up and fireplace openings walled over. The only features retained were walnut balustrades on the stairways. These date, however, from the later 19th century. Architects for remodeling at this time: Small, Smith and Reeb of Cleveland, Ohio.

Sources of Information

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION.

A. General statement. Architectural interest and merit.

The Center Building was built and probably designed by John Jordan in 1822-1824. Originally a single building, it is connected to flat-porticoed wings by two lower, pilastered structures (1842). Pedimented pavilions terminate the enfilade. "No more impressive expression of the educational ideas of the time could be imagined than this Classic group." [Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America, p. 211.]

"Washington College, like the University of Virginia, is one of the very few examples of an ante bellum collegiate institution where the architecture is based principally on Roman, rather than Greek, precedent." [Loth, op. cit., p. 61.] This group was selected for Architecture in Virginia, 1776-1958: the Old Dominion's Twelve Best Buildings, Va. Museum.

B. Exterior description:

Three stories, temple-form, 50' x 100'.  
The first floor level is at the finished grade.  
Walls are red painted brick; all trim is painted white.  
Structure: timber framing, masonry bearing walls  
Chimneys: 10 - five on each side  
Portico: Three-story with six Tuscan columns.

Openings: windows - 12 over 12  
segmental brick arches (four courses high  
on 1st floor, 3 courses high on 2d)  
wooden sills  
no shutters

Roof: A-roof  
plain tympanum, plastered  
full entablature, plastered. Half-round gutter forms  
crown moulding. Bed mould is cyma recta.

Cupola: On square base on ridge of roof in line with first  
chimneys. After design of octagonal tower of Andronicus,  
"The Tower of Winds", at Athens. 32' high. Just under  
cornice is Greek fret moulding.

Statue on top of cupola: Good example of American folk art.  
Of Washington, carved from pine log by Matthew Kahle,  
local cabinet maker, with assistance of Col. Williamson  
of VMI, and placed in 1844.

C. Interior:

Whole structure was rebuilt within the walls in 1936,  
and interior plans were considerably altered. No surviving  
original features. [Loth, op. cit., p. 23.]

Prepared by Mrs. McCluer Gilliam after consulting  
Mr. Nathaniel Weblett, Architect  
Lynchburg, Virginia  
Date of visit: February 13, 1969